

CHUM TREE MONTH

(unfinished)

by

Daniel A. Kornguth

The first day I walked around this town it was sunny and unseasonably warm. The leaves were starting to turn vibrant colors. I noticed a lot purples.

I manifested a coffee shop where they could make me a perfect restretto. While standing in line I heard someone talking about the Chum Tree. A petite woman in form fitting clothes with the bright eyes, unruly hair and clear complexion of a yoga instructor. She beamed up at a broad-chested mountain of a man. His black beard was neatly trimmed and his dark eyes were little gleaming slits under his wool knit cap.

“I thought that cold weather was here to stay,” she remarked as she stirred her chai.

While administering sugar to his coffee the man off-handedly muttered “Indian summer.”

“We should take advantage of this sunshine. We should plan a trip out to the Chum Tree or something – this week.” She touched his sleeve.

“School’s starting tomorrow. I’m gonna be busy.”

“Maybe we can go today then, before it gets dark.”

As they walked out he said, “Maybe, we’ll see.” And you know he was thinking about it.

It was my turn at the counter and I got distracted by a conversation with the owner of how to pour a perfect restretto which evolved into a conversation about this town and

where he came from and the art on the walls and the artist that painted it and soon I'd forgotten to ask him about the Chum Tree.

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Deciding that I'd better find my next job before the one I'd moved to this town to do was done, I spent a good portion of the next day at the coffee shop reading the classifieds and scouring the internet for help wanted. After reading about twenty personal ads – half of which I responded to – I thought I'd rest my eyes and study the art some more. They were big paintings on canvas. Most of the images were of children dressed in antiquated clothes in awkward spaces full of acute angles that created a kind of claustrophobic forced perspective, but one of the paintings (probably the coolest one) was of birds flocked around a pair of little girl shoes. There were also a lot of words painted in a kind of old school typewriter font. I thought the art was really good. It was a proper combination of facility and playfulness; thought provoking but not pedantic and ultimately aesthetically pleasing, not that that's the only purpose for art.

Given the quality of the work, I figured there was no way this woman – the painter – could be attractive.

All morning the Chum Tree never crossed my mind.

When my eyes started to burn from staring at the monitor, I decided I'd go for a drive and learn the lay of the land.

The town was laid out pretty much like a grid with a little river winding through it and train tracks bisecting it laterally. The mountains rose up just a little ways outside of town to the west. They called them foothills. There was nothing in any other direction except a bunch of *flat* and the occasional *rolling*. The town was dominated by the college, the top

corner of which nearly touched “Old Town.” Old Town felt right to me. It made sense: brick buildings with an aesthetic sense and a human scale. The rest of the town was given over to chain stores; Big boxes with familiar names in bright, well-lit, primary colors.

At one point, towards the end of my wandering, I ended up down a long, sparsely settled street. It turned into dirt which looked almost like a wash. The angel of the light was good and I decided to pause to read a chapter of my book as the sun sank behind the mountains.

How could I have known that I was so near the Chum Tree?

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The next day I met her.

I wasn't thinking too hard about getting my next job or finishing the one I had. I guess that's how I am a lot of the time which is probably why I live hand to mouth most of my life. I was just taking my coffee and I saw her walk by and get in line at the counter. She was bouncy with a pixie haircut. Faint freckles danced on the pale skin of her high cheek bones. When she smiled – which she seemed to do a lot – her cheeks got cartoonish. I'm talking about a rather attractive cartoon, especially when her jagged blond bangs obscured her big blue eyes.

Fortunately, I had my computer out, so when the owner of the place introduced us, and I explained that I'm also an artist, I actually had some images to show her. Even more fortunately, she dug my work.

I could tell she was really looking at it. As we talked about her work I could tell she hadn't talked much about art since she graduated from college a little over a year earlier. I couldn't tell, however, whether or not she was flirting with me though I swear to this day

that she was.

She couldn't sit still long though. She invited me to go buy some cigarettes with her down the street. Outside the café it was another sunny day. We bumped into a friend of hers who used to work at the coffee shop and who had been fired for mysterious and/or ambiguous reasons. As I walked with the two girls the artist told the ex-barista about a party next weekend, out at the Chum Tree. The conversation was quite animated. They were excited because the host was something of alt-society elder statesman. I could barely get a word in edgewise. Their banter continued without cessation across the street, half way down the block, into the drug store, past the magazine rack (where the artist somehow selected a weighty fashion mag without missing a beat), in front of the counter, throughout the entire *select brand-see some i.d.-get out drivers license-hand over pack-procure money-get change* process, and out the front door where we lit our cigarettes. I partook of one of hers 'cuz it seemed like a thing to do.

We started walking. I was just about to inquire in regards to the Chum Tree when something the artist said caused the ex-barista to cross her arms, pausing briefly to look at the artist sideways, head all tilted and say, "You're a real bitch," which she prefaced with an implied "tch."

The artist, who had stopped, resumed her stride.

"I'm not a bitch. You don't really think I'm a bitch," she explained, smoking her cigarette and looking forward.

I'd become invisible. I smoked my cigarette but I was not enjoying it.

"No. I do. You are a bitch." The ex-barista said it in this really bitchy way.

“Maybe what I said was bitchy. But I’m not a bitch.” Then she added a little quieter,
“Though what I said wasn’t bitchy.”

The ex-barista stayed her course. “No. You’re a bitch.”

The whole thing was awkward, but not intense enough to be either humorous or inappropriate. It kept up to the curb where they noticed me again. Since my truck was parked right there I thought it best to depart. They said good bye with out apologizing for fighting in front of me nor further mention of either the party next weekend or, unfortunately, the Chum Tree.

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